

# Pepperdine Journal of Communication Research

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Volume 2

Article 2

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2014

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### Recommended Citation

Doubenmier, Demitria Rene (2014) "The Portrayal of Interracial Relationships on Television Programs for Teens," *Pepperdine Journal of Communication Research*: Vol. 2, Article 2.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/pjcr/vol2/iss1/2>

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The Portrayal of Interracial Relationships on  
Television Programs for Teens

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### **Abstract**

The portrayals of minorities and interracial relationships on prime time television are often skewed and inaccurate. Minorities are drastically under represented in proportion to their actual standing in the population. Through a content analysis, researchers coded interpersonal interracial interactions in the television series, Glee. The study sought to understand the portrayal minority relationships in content geared towards teens and young adults, focusing on the quality of friendships and romantic relationships. Researchers found that 79.2 percent of interracial relationship members were seen as equals. Of all the material coded, approximately nine hours, 48 interracial interactions occurred. Interracial relationships were portrayed as honest and unaffectionate and were very much so under represented. Future research should code both same race and interracial relationships for the ability to compare and contrast relationship quality.

### The Portrayal of Interracial Relationships on Television Programs for Teens

Although media allows for immediacy and a plentiful conglomerate of knowledge, media messages are found, more often than not, to be skewed and biased, although framed in ways that appear real and normal to the social audience (Gerbner, 1972). In particular, portrayals of underrepresented individuals must continue to be evaluated, for previous research has found that they are often misrepresented and depicted negatively (Mastro, 2000). Not only are individuals of minority groups underrepresented, but their interactions with people of different ethnicities are, too, an area that needs investigating. In today's society, so strife with problems in the realm of minority relations, all influences must be considered relevant and worthy of close inspection. Minority populations are rapidly growing in size. States including New Mexico and California are slated to reflect a Mexican American majority as soon as 2014. Such societal change calls for media representation to keep up and accurately depict relations between people of different races and ethnicities. Thus, the aim of this study is to expand on existing content analyses and examine the portrayal of minority characters' relational interactions on the entertainment television comedy show, *Glee*, specifically geared toward teens and young adults.

Research has shed light on portrayals of minorities in many media outlets including news, television, and film. Most research in this area, however, has focused on crime news and long running dramas geared towards middle-aged adults. This study seeks to expand on existing findings about racial depictions by focusing on the portrayal of racial minorities in situational dramas geared towards a teenage audience. The popular television sitcom that this study will examine is arguably heavily inspired by societal

sensations and trends in popular culture and therefore is reflective of teenage attitudes. These attitudes are important to understand, as the viewers of these shows will soon make up the adult populace of the United States. Before specifically stating our research question, it is necessary to review relevant bodies of literature, including past studies of minority characters in media and media effects theories that help explain the significance of this research.

### **Review of Literature**

#### **Media Portrayals of Minorities**

Previous research strongly supports the notion that the media drastically misrepresents ethnic minorities both in terms of how often they are represented and how they are portrayed (e.g., Mastro, 2000; Dixon, 2007). In a content analysis of a one-week sample of prime time television, Mastro (2000) found that minorities are often extremely under represented in relation to the proportion of the population that they actually hold. For example, while making up 12 percent of the population, Latinos comprise three percent of the TV population (Mastro, 2000). Mastro (2000) explains that due to the lack of broadcast television network shows targeted at Latinos with Latino characters, Latinos tend to watch programs targeted for a white audience. This phenomena, then, perpetuates underrepresentation for Latinos as they tend to assimilate into white lifestyles, somewhat stripping America of a Mexican heritage (Mastro, 2000). In advertisements, Latino characters are even more drastically underrepresented, making up only one percent of speaking characters in commercials (Mastro & Stern, 2003).

While the proportionality misrepresentation is evident, Latinos are also often portrayed in stereotypical ways. They are often depicted as sensual and engaging in

alluring behaviors (Mastro & Stern, 2003). In another study that examined emotional visual representations of different ethnicities in newspapers, researchers clearly identified the depiction of Latinos as sad, calm, and submissive (Roger, Kenix, & Thorson, 2007). Mastro (2000) also found Latinos to be commonly portrayed as inarticulate, unprofessionally dressed, and characterized by heavy accents. Also, Latinos were disproportionately depicted as having conversations about crime and violence. This research illustrates that Latinos are the most inaccurately portrayed and represented minority ethnic group in the media, compared to African Americans and Asian Americans.

The most studied minority population analyzed in media content is African Americans. In a content analysis measuring the extent of publicity on local Los Angeles television news found that Blacks, as well as Latinos, were twice as likely as Whites to be associated with prejudicial statements. Also, stories featuring Black and Latino defendants and White victims were more likely than stories featuring White defendants and non-white victims to contain prejudicial information (Dixon & Linz, 2002). These findings depict that the content most commonly associated with these minority groups is negative and dealing with crime. Further research supporting the notion of misrepresentativeness of African Americans studied the relationship between poverty and race. Gilan (1996) examined stories in magazines that emphasized the underclass and found that African Americans are overwhelmingly misrepresented as a part of the lower class. Given both findings from previous research, it is clear that the portrayal of African Americans in the media is skewed and inaccurate. They are overrepresented as criminals and part of the underclass.

Asian Americans also experience tensions of accurate representativeness in the media. Encompassing four percent of the United States population, Asian Americans only comprise one percent of the TV population (Mastro, 2000). They are most commonly depicted as passive and tied to technology ads, which further perpetuates stereotypes of submissiveness and superior achievement (Mastro & Stern, 2003). This content analysis of TV commercials suggests that because of the strong association between technology ads, Asian Americans are perceived as dedicated to work only, ultimately tying self-worth to submissiveness and superior achievement (Mastro & Stern, 2003).

Relative to Caucasians, all ethnic groups have the common emotional visual representation of submissiveness (Roger, Kenix & Thorson, 2007). Also, whites are over represented in TV commercials, making up 75.1 percent of characters, far more than their actual representation in the American populace. This radical misrepresentation reinforces the dominance and superiority of white America, qualities that enforce submissiveness of minority races (Mastro & Stern, 2003).

### **Interracial Relationships on Television**

With such strong evidence supporting the misrepresentation and portrayals of minority characters on television, the interpersonal interactions between racial groups on television can, too, be expected to show under representativeness and less relational quality within relationships. Interracial relationships are often portrayed on television as less intimate than same race relationships (Washington, 2012). When specifically looking at medical dramas, research shows that interracial relationships are depicted in such ways that support white dominance (Washington, 2012). Washington (2012) further supports

this claim declaring that despite the apparent racial progressiveness in current TV medical dramas, the interracial Black and Asian relationships “work to maintain and cement... supremacy through hegemonic rule of television” (p.267). These relationships are undoubtedly noticed for their rarity. Inaccurate associations of interracial relationships, marriages and families with class, gender and racial hierarchies effectively shut out the possibility of a more nuanced representation (Washington, 2012).

The level or degree in which interracial partners communicate is most often portrayed to a lesser degree than that of same race relations (Auletta & Hammerback, 1985). Prime-time television presents communication patterns characterized by independent relationships between Black and White leads, while interdependence was more often found between leads of the same race (Auletta & Hammerback, 1985). Researchers have found that interaction among white, same race characters are significantly more intimate, multifaceted, and more likely to involve decision making than interactions involving both black and white characters (Weigel, Loomis, & Soja, 1980). Furthermore, voluntary relationships between blacks and whites were depicted as significantly less intimate than voluntary relationships among whites (Weigel, et al., 1980). An analysis of more updated shows geared specifically toward young adults will help further an understanding and create awareness of the portrayal of interracial relationships in media.

### **Theoretical Perspectives**

The portrayal of minorities and interracial interactions on television may have a strong influence on audiences. Social cognitive theory states that people learn based on observation of social experiences (Bandura, 2001). This can be through personal



interaction or media. Transmitted messages from the media affect and determine “which environmental events will be observed, what meaning will be conferred on them, whether they leave any lasting effects, what emotional impact and motivating power they will have, and how the information they convey will be organized for future use” (Bandura, 2001, p.267). The process of learning is predicted by the observation of models and by social experiences; therefore, research suggests that if the media, a powerful social figure, misrepresents certain groups, how audience members think about and interact with those groups in the real world can be formed by viewing television. If the media is inaccurately portraying minorities and interracial interactions then it can be expected that society will inaccurately learn how to treat and interact with these groups.

The amount of TV watched also affects our understanding of the social world in relation to media. Cultivation theory assumes that heavy exposure to the symbolic world of television can eventually make the televised images appear to be an authentic state of human dealings (Gerbner, 1972). Theorists hold that television, among modern mass media, has acquired a central place in our daily lives and has become the primary source of socialization and everyday information. Furthermore, after continuous, heavy television exposure, audiences gradually adopt the symbolic reality created by television and incorporate its images into their living environment (Gerbner, 1972).

Thus, according to cultivation theory, the effects of viewing stereotypic portrayals of minority characters can further perpetuate racism in America. An experiment tested whether varying races of perpetrators and officers in a newscast would have an impact on judgments regarding the officers and perpetrators portrayed in a crime story (Dixon, 2007). In other words, the study sought to find out whether the race of a perpetrator or

officer had an impact on the attitude or the inclination to stereotype the perpetrator as black and the officer as white. Dixon (2007) found that participants perceived a strong likelihood that a suspect was African American even though the suspect was unidentified. The study brings forth the notions that perhaps, because the news over represents African American as criminals, the cognitive association between Blacks and lawbreaking is perpetually reinforced (Dixon, 2007). Dixon supports this claim with his finding that heavy news viewers are prone, in the case of forgetting the race of an officer or crime suspect, to assume that the officer is white and the crime suspect is African American, even when the truth reflects the opposite. Light news viewers, in comparison, when crime suspects were white, were far less likely to falsely assume the race of the suspect to be African American. Another study examining minority character's representation as court representatives on primetime TV suggests that media's impact on social perceptions extends to racial stereotypes of criminality by stating the relative scarcity of images portraying minorities as respected figures could impact stereotype formation (Tamborini & Mastro, 2000). Exposure to these ideas and events of reinforced stereotypes can lead people to adopt the symbolic world of television and view it as actual or true.

### **Research Question**

These theories illustrate the consequences that the misrepresentation of social groups can have on the social world itself. The media has strong influence in what people view as real and normal. Research has attempted to understand the misrepresentativeness of interracial communication on television but has failed to explore the genre of primetime programs geared toward the easily manipulated age demographic of teens and young adults, a key public that has the potential of negatively being affected by the

inaccurate portrayal of minority character interactions. This study seeks to examine the portrayal of interracial relationships on prime time television geared toward teens and young adults.

RQ: How are interracial relationships portrayed on prime time television geared toward teens?

## **Method**

### **Sample**

The unit of analysis for this study included a prime time sitcom geared toward teens and young adults. The study will specifically analyze the content in the show Glee. This show was chosen as a convenience sample using Netflix. Coders will view at least ten episodes of the most recent season. This is to ensure relevancy. One episode will be viewed as a group to ensure inter-coder reliability. Our area of research focuses of televised entertainment in the realm of programs geared toward teens to further examine content from a different angle, for previous research on minority portrayals has dealt primarily with adult dramas and news coverage. Glee features racially diverse characters interacting in friendships and romantic relationships.

### **Coders, Training and Inter-coder Reliability**

For this study, three undergraduate students, who are also the primary researchers of the study, will serve as coders. Coders will watch one episode of content together to ensure reliability among coders. They will code each interaction independently then compare results to make sure all coders are coding the same. The three coders will then discuss and address any problems. At this point, the codebook will be revised if necessary.

If there are no problems, each coder will independently code three more episodes of Glee. Inter-coder reliability will be calculated using Cohen's kappa. Reliability will be checked for the unitizing of quality of relationship between interracial partners.

### **Measures**

The codebook provides definition of these measures for this study in the appendix.

Type of Relationship: Either a friendship or romantic relationship

Race of Characters: The perceived ethnic group that one seems to be a part of; such as (1) Asian, (2) Hispanic, (3) African American, (4) Caucasian or (5) other.

Quality of Relationship: Quality will be measured using a three-point Likert scale measuring:

Supportiveness: occurs when one member shows encouragement to the other

Trustworthiness: the degree to which one can rely on one's authenticity and character.

Honesty: the degree to which one is truthful to the other.

Closeness: the degree of dedication and loyalty one has to the other

Satisfaction: The degree to which each member is pleased with the relationship

Physical affection: Outwardly expressed notions of adoration through touch and gestures

Verbal/written affection: interpersonal communicative display of adoration through speaking or written notes.

Level of equality between partners: the individuals in a relationship are seen as equals, neither partner is seen as predominately submissive or dominant.

Each characteristic will range from the absence of the characteristic (1) to the apparent existence of the characteristic (3). For example, satisfaction ranges from no satisfaction(1) to satisfaction (3).

### **Results**

RQ: The research question in this study sought to explain the quality of minority relationships in television programs geared toward teens and young adults, specifically Glee. Because a content analysis was conducted, inter-coder reliability was computed with  $\alpha$  ranging between .76 and 1.00. Based on the data in our sample, 79.2 percent of all interracial interactions displayed the members as equal to each other. Also, 93.8 percent of interactions were honest. When it came to affection, interpersonal interracial interactions were barely affectionate, with written or verbal affection absent in 62.5 percent of interactions and physical affection absent in 70.8 percent of interactions. Thus, these finding answer the research question, depicting minority relationships as honest and rarely affectionate, with each member viewed as equals. All other variables measured for quality of relationship, including supportiveness, trustworthiness, closeness, satisfaction and self-disclosure, showed insignificant findings.

### **Discussion**

Existing research on the portrayals of minority relations primarily focused on the inaccurate depictions and negatively attributed stereotypic characteristics. Media outlets have been criticized for under representing racial minority groups (Mastro, 2000) and framing messages to reinforce negative stereotypes (Mastro & Stern, 2003). Research also supported the notion that interracial relationships are portrayed as less intimate than same race relationships on television (Washington, 2012). These studies taken together

suggest the media's representation of minorities in the media is inaccurate, negative and damaging.

### **Findings**

While previous research strongly supports negative and less intimate depictions of minorities, this study focused purely on interracial relationships in Glee. After coding numerous episodes, the interracial interactions in the show were notably unaffectionate, both verbally and physically. However, romantic interracial relationships were more affectionate than interracial friendships. All members within each interracial interpersonal encounter were seen as equals to each other, neither member holding a more dominant role over the other. A prominent characteristic pattern seen in each interaction was a high level of honesty between members of the relationship.

Romantic interracial relationships were portrayed as more supportive, trustworthy and showed evidence of self-disclosure compared to interracial friendships. Friendships were less intimate regarding closeness within the relationship and seemed to be less satisfied than romantic relationships.

When examining the quality of interracial relationships, they seem to be portrayed quite normally, negating the findings of previous research supporting the notion of negative depictions of interracial relationships. As for representativeness, however, research accurately predicted the under representation of interracial relationships. The research design for this study originally began with a sample size of nine episodes but because so many episodes had so few interracial interactions, some episodes with interactions non-existent, three more episodes were added to the sample to ensure enough measurable data. After coding 12 45-minute shows, approximately nine hours of content,

only 48 interracial interpersonal interactions occurred. Applying social cognitive theory, it can be expected that heavy television viewers would accept the concept of interracial relationships as uncommon and abnormal given the drastic underrepresentation of interracial encounters.

### **Limitations and Implications for Future Research**

It should be noted that the purpose of this study was to examine the portrayal of interracial relationships in television content geared toward teens; accordingly, it is unknown whether viewing such content has any effect on its audience behavior or attitude. The findings of this study are purely descriptive and cannot explain why the content is the way it is or the effect of the messages. The reductionistic approach to analyzing content reduced all encounters to code-able content, leaving the researchers responsible for interpreting complex human experiences using interval data.

The findings of this study should also be taken with some precaution given that inter-coder reliability was low for some measured variables. With extreme time constraints, the sample size and reliability code training suffered in an effort to collect data before deadlines. Because the study used a convenience sample, the findings are non-representative and cannot be attributed to the greater population.

Scholars interested in furthering research in the area should examine a greater number of episodes, an entire series or, perhaps, a wider variety of shows. Also, researchers should attempt to analyze same-race interactions and compare the quality of those interactions to those of interracial interactions. The data collection of same race interactions will grant researchers the ability to further understand the quality of interracial interaction, providing a control group that could highlight differences, if any.

Further examination of interracial interaction on television should include small group interactions as well as interpersonal and include professional relationships in accordance with friendships and romantic relationships.



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## Appendix

### Codebook

How is the quality of interracial friendships and romantic relationship portrayed in TV programs geared toward young adults?

The following steps should be taken in the content analysis coding described below:

1. Each assigned television episode is watched to identify any interracial friendships or romantic relationships
2. The coder will create one code for each individual encounter between members of the relationship.
3. Each encounter is then analyzed for the specific characteristics described below.

### Variable 1: Type of Relationship

- (1) Definition of Friendship: an interpersonal connection where both parties bond over common interests and activities while enjoying the company of one another
- (2) Definitions of Romantic Relationship: an interpersonal connection where both parties mutually experience physical attraction and desire intimate interaction.

### Variable 2: Race

- (1) Asian: Someone of obvious Asian decent that exemplifies common Asian characteristics, such as fair skin, dark hair, and dark, narrow eyes.
- (2) Hispanic: Someone of obvious Central to South American or Spanish decent that exemplifies characteristics such as tanish, olive skin, dark hair, hint of Spanish speaking accent.
- (3) African American: Someone of obvious African decent that exemplifies characteristics such as dark skin, dark hair, full lips
- (4) Caucasian: Someone of western European decent that exemplifies characteristics such as light skin, light eyes and narrow lips.
- (5) Other: Someone of an ethnicity other than Caucasian that does not fit into any of the other categories

### Variable 3: Quality of Relationship

- Definition: A supportive, trusting, honest and committed interpersonal connection.

Supportiveness: occurs when one member shows encouragement to the other.

- 1= not supportive: obvious lack of approval or encouragement in a situation
- 2= somewhat supportive: characters show some signs of affirmation but could do more
- 3= supportive: displays multiple signs of affirmation and reinforcement leading to the other member of the relationship feeling better
- 9= not present or not applicable

Mutual Trust: the degree to which one can rely on one's authenticity and character.

- 1=No mutual trust: validity of character or intentions are in question, leads to snooping and sneaking around.
- 2= some mutual trust: there are a few trust issues between members but not enough to end friendship
- 3=High mutual trust: both members are confident in the other member's intentions, very little secret keeping, snooping, sneaking around.
- 9= not present or not applicable

Physical Affection: Outwardly expressed notions of adoration through touch and gestures

- 1= No physical affection: characters never physically interact expressing adoration for the other
- 2= some physical affection: Characters sometimes show affection
- 3= High amounts of physical affection: Characters often hug or high five, expressing adoration for one another.
- 9= not present or not applicable

Verbal/ Written Affection: Interpersonal communicative display of adoration through speaking or written notes.

- 1= no verbal/written affection: Characters never express in words the adoration for the other
- 2= some verbal/written affection: characters sometimes express their love and adoration but it isn't extremely prevalent
- 3= high amounts of verbal/ written affection: Characters often express their love and adoration for the other
- 9= not present or not applicable

Level of Equality in Relationship: the individuals in a relationship are seen as equals, neither partner is seen as predominately submissive or dominant.

- 1= not equal: one member is viewed as extremely submissive where the other is very dominant
- 2=somewhat equal: there are some status differences in relationship but there are some equal aspects as well
- 3= equal: Characters are seen as equal contributors within the relationship
- 9= not present or not applicable

Honest: The degree to which one is truthful to the other

- 1= dishonest: partners do not tell the truth or lie often
- 2= somewhat honest: partners lie sometimes about small things but are honest when it comes to major issues

3= Honest: partners often tell the truth

9= not present or not applicable

Closeness: The degree of dedication and loyalty one has to the other

1= acquaintance: there are external factors that contribute to the lack of loyalty and commitment to partner.

2= somewhat close: characters show little supportiveness but could definitely do more.

3= very close/best friends: Partners share in a strong bond and have no external factors that contribute to disloyalty.

9= not present or not applicable

Level of Satisfaction: The degree to which each member is pleased with the relationship

1= unsatisfied: Characters show extreme discontent in relationship, a strong desire to fix or change relationship.

2= somewhat satisfied: characters show some discontentment with the relationship but are over all happy in the relationship

3= satisfied: Characters show extreme contentment and are pleased with relationship, low level of conflict

9= not present or not applicable

Evidence of Self-disclosure: the sharing of personal information about one's self

1= no

2= yes

9= not present or not applicable

Character Role

1= major: appears in every episode

2= minor: appears in multiple shows but not all

## **Coding Form**

The portrayal of interracial friendships and romantic relationship quality in TV comedies geared toward young adults.

Name of Coder:

Duration of scene:

Start Time: \_\_\_\_\_

End Time: \_\_\_\_\_

Brief Summary of interaction:

## **Type of Relationship**

(1) Friendship: an interpersonal connection where both parties bond over common interests and activities while enjoying the company of one another

(2) Romantic Relationship: an interpersonal connection where both parties mutually experience physical attraction and desire intimate interaction.

### **Race**

(1) Asian      (2) Hispanic    (3) African American    (4) Caucasian    (5) other

1<sup>st</sup> member: \_\_\_\_\_

2<sup>nd</sup> member: \_\_\_\_\_

### **Quality of Relationship**

Definition: A supportive, trusting, honest and committed interpersonal connection.

Supportiveness: occurs when one member shows encouragement to the other

(1) Not supportive      (2) Somewhat supportive    (3) Supportive

(9) Not applicable/present

Mutual Trust: the degree to which one can rely on one's authenticity and character.

(1) No mutual trust                      (2) Some mutual trust                      (3) High mutual trust

(9) Not applicable/ present

Physical Affection: Outwardly expressed notions of adoration through touch and gestures

(1) No physical affection      (2) Some physical affection

(3) Very physically affectionate      (9) Not applicable/present

Verbal/ Written Affection: Interpersonal communicative display of adoration through speaking or written notes.

(1) No verbal/written affection    (2) Some verbal/written affection

(3) Very verbally/written affectionate    (9) Not applicable/present

Level of Equality in Relationship: the individuals in a relationship are seen as equals, neither partner is seen as predominately submissive or dominant.

(1) Not equal                      (2) Somewhat equal    (3) Equal                      (9) Not applicable/present

Honest: The degree to which one is truthful to the other

(1) Dishonest                      (2) Somewhat honest    (3) Honest                      (9) Not applicable/present

Closeness: The degree of dedication and loyalty one has to the other

(1) Acquaintance                      (2) Somewhat close    (3) very close/best friends

(9) Not present /applicable

Level of Satisfaction: The degree to which each member is pleased with the relationship

(1) Unsatisfied                      (2) Somewhat satisfied                      (3) Satisfied

(9) Not applicable/present

Evidence of Self-disclosure: the sharing of personal information about one's self

(1) No evidence                      (2) some evidence                      (3) evident

(9) not applicable/present

Character Role

(1) Major                      (2) Minor